

Active Learning

This page introduces 'Active Learning' as a series of FAQs - what is it? how can it help students learn effectively? how it helps raise standards? and more.

Note – I have used the term ‘students’ for all learners aged 5-95, regardless of what phase of education they are in.

What is Active Learning?

The key features of the activities are that they require students to do some, or all, of the following:

- Move physically and constructively e.g. to represent patterns of alliances or the flow of events
- “Think from the inside” i.e. think about a past situation from the perspective of an individual or group
- Take decisions from that perspective and relate these decisions to what we know actually happened in the past
- Take part in physical diagrams e.g. timelines, living graphs, washing lines or physical family trees
- Ask questions of, or argue with, the teacher or other students in role as a historical character

More information on the different types of activity is included below.

I understand that the technical term for much of this is 'Enactive Representation' but I'd been using these activities for many years before discovering this term. I could spend a lot longer trying to define active-learning but, having avoided agonising over terminology for the last twenty years, I'm not going to start now!

Why do these activities help students to learn more effectively?

1. The key to constructing and using these activities successfully is building them around learning problems that students have with a topic. Therefore activities can meet one or more of a wide variety of objectives such as:

- developing knowledge of a sequence of events
- understanding contemporary attitudes and motives
- developing explanations or analysing patterns of change and continuity
- challenging misconceptions about past events and thinking
- analysing why historians have differing interpretations of an event or person

Each activity in the Resources section begins by identifying its objectives and relating them to the learning problems that students have. The activities are therefore not bolted-on extras or end of term treats. They are serious learning activities – but that doesn't mean they can't be fun as well.

2. Experience shows that these activities are very effective in motivating students of all ages and stimulating their interest. As a result they improve more traditional activities – classroom discussion and written work. Discussion has more depth because the activity has required a higher level of concentration and has generated deeper understanding. Students are also more willing to contribute orally and to listen to each other's perspectives. Better-focused, more effective talking leads, in turn, to better writing.

3. Each student has a preference for how they receive and process information. Visual learners prefer to see information, auditory learners like to hear information and kinaesthetic learners learn best when physically involved (touching, doing, feeling) with their learning. Kinaesthetic learners are likely to benefit the most from active-learning although others, particularly auditory learners will benefit too. Variety is

good for everyone, even the teacher! Students with special needs, such as dyslexia, are another group who benefit considerably from these activities.

4. These activities bring together four elements that are crucial to really effective history teaching. To teach history really well, we have to juggle four different kinds of knowledge and understanding:

- a) knowledge of the historical topic
- b) understanding of how history is studied e.g. how evidence is analysed and used
- c) knowledge of the kinds of learning problems students have with a particular topic
- d) understanding that different students have different ways of processing and learning – as above point 3.

In recent years, far more attention has been paid to (c) and (d) than in previous decades, and I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that they are crucial to making the best use of the teacher's knowledge of (a) and (b) at all levels and ages of education. Put simply, you can be a really good historian and talk about history very well but if you don't think about how your students learn, then much of that wonderful knowledge will go to waste. The activities on this site attempt to juggle all four elements by diagnosing learning problems and providing opportunities for more varied, kinaesthetic learning and so enabling students to acquire deeper historical knowledge and understanding, which is our ultimate goal. And they're more fun so there'll be fewer people saying 'I hated history at school'.

What are some of the benefits of active learning?

1. Everyone can contribute effectively, regardless of literacy levels, and realise that hard work equals hard thinking, not necessarily lots of writing!
2. Follow-up work benefits from both the degree of involvement and the clarity of thinking generated by the activity. Continual references can be made back to pupils'

actions and reactions during activity, using that very powerful question 'Do you remember when ...?' to focus students' thinking.

3. Students respond positively and enjoy the activities. They report that they learn more when they enjoy a lesson and are actively involved. The power of involvement in decision-making and role-play can also be surprising. A host of anecdotal evidence suggests that students remember far more history when they have taken part in active learning. Many years ago I tried a Saxon village simulation with first year undergraduates, just for four weeks at the beginning of their course. I was a little disappointed by the outcomes at the time. Two and a half years later, after graduation, I discovered that nearly all of them could remember the names and roles that had had in the simulation, who other people were and some of the issues they had had to deal with.

4. Students have to think about and use language more precisely because words encapsulate attitudes. For example, in *Je suis le Roi!* should the English talk about the Normans as their 'lords' or their 'masters'; whether England is 'ruled' or 'occupied'; whether the northerners were 'punished' or 'massacred'?

5. Enactive representations enable students to realise and understand the complexity of a developing situation, not see an event as a single moment in time when simple, unemotional, cut and dried decisions were made. This helps students to develop more sophisticated explanations.

6. Some activities reach the undefinables that play a part in decision making. For example, why did so many people join the revolt of 1381? Only a role-play is likely to help pupils understand the fear of being left behind alone in the village, the moral pressure to join in with your mates, the adventure of going up to London - all reasons which must have played their part in 1381, just as in 1914 and on other occasions when people made individual choices in the midst of group action.

7. Role-play also leads into the vital question of 'how do we know that these recreated attitudes and feelings are accurate?' Empathetic reconstructions must relate to evidence. Therefore an important follow-up activity is to look at the available

evidence and ask pupils how certain they can be about the accuracy of their feelings in role - completely certain, fairly or totally uncertain.

8. ... well, I could go on but see individual activities for other positive benefits!

How are students moving?

One of the problems of writing about kinaesthetic teaching methods is that you end up trying to describe movement. It's a bit like trying to explain what a ballet dancer does – at some point you're reduced to saying that they wave their arms round a lot and hop up and down – not the most artistic description ever! And it's the same with active learning – how do you best describe the choreography of the pupils round the classroom? With charts? With text?

At last, I've been able to resolve this dilemma by filming it; the 'Active Learning DVD' is the ideal complement to the scripts on this website, allowing you to see how the sequence of movement develops, how the pupils can be prompted to think through their answers and, above all, how structured and how controlled the activities are - all the features that, otherwise, you have to visualise.

What are the Models of Active Learning?

I'm very sceptical of carefully structured categories and labels because teaching is never neat like that. But I've prepared this list to provide a foundation, to help make explicit the underlying model of learning. A useful description of each model is included on the website.

- Hot Seating
- Washing Lines
- Timelines & Living Graphs
- Role Plays
- Simulations

- Decision Making
- Physical Maps & Family Trees
- Archaeology & Mysteries
- Creating Communities
- Other/Miscellaneous

Why do many activities work best as introductions to topics?

Enactive representations and group role-plays provide an effective introduction by outlining events, people or issues or encouraging students to predict events or outcomes. This acts as a first layer of knowledge on which further classes can build. Reinforcement through layering of knowledge seems the best way to build up lasting knowledge in depth. The activity also generates enthusiasm and a desire to know more. Older students are also enabled to read independently and more effectively, building on the introductory framework provided by the activity.

Why is it helpful to use another room for some activities?

Another room creates a sense of occasion - this lesson is going to be far more special than anything in Science or another inferior subject! It also helps the suspension of disbelief that is particularly useful for, for example, hot-seating. A hall or gym is also larger and usually without the clutter of desks getting in the way. Music also helps prepare students for something different and creates a sense of period.

When debriefing, it is important to move students on from being 'in the past' to reflecting 'on the past', albeit reflections enhanced by their experience of thinking from the inside of the historical events. This is easier if the debrief takes place back in the normal classroom, rather than the room in which the activity had taken place.

Be careful if you are tempted to take a class outside to make use of more space. Your voice and those of students won't carry as far outside and even a gentle breeze plays havoc with tabards.

How long does an activity take?

A piece of string question! Some activities designed for A level or university are lengthy will probably take at least an hour although they can be broken into sections. Others last 20-30 minutes although some are shorter still. Ian Luff has shown, in several articles in Teaching History, how effective even very short activities can be. Everything depends on the students and the demands you want to make on them. The length of the activity is less important than the clarity with which the activity targets the problems students have in learning about the topic.

What are the key elements of debriefing?

Firstly, use closed questions which allow students to demonstrate knowledge of people and events or other information gained from the activity. These boost self-esteem as they realize how much they can remember without having written anything down! These questions also reinforce the narrative framework.

Secondly, ask more challenging, higher-order, open questions which deal with motives, explanation, consequences, attitudes etc.

Thirdly, ask students to describe aloud what they were thinking and feeling at different stages of the activity. For example, in Je suis le roi! students who played English landowners were able to express how their feelings had changed from insecurity to anger during the activity and reflect on how their inability to understand William (who spoke in French) had affected them.

The bravest questions of all are the very open ended (but worth asking!):

- What have you learned today?
- What surprised you about what happened in that activity?

Is there really time to add these activities into a course?

Active learning provides a most effective first layer of learning when beginning a topic. Students take vital steps in building their framework of knowledge and in developing conceptual understanding. Over 20 years experience of using these

activities suggests that they are not luxuries but essentials because they accelerate learning in the early stages of a unit of work. They enable students of all abilities (although most obviously the weaker students) to overcome initial obstacles they might otherwise bounce off. Having 'walked through' events and 'thought from the inside' they are much more able get to grips with detail and complexities and, crucially at A level and beyond, they can read about them more effectively. The page is no longer an obstacle course full of completely unfamiliar material.

What about the class management risks?

Students and new teachers often feel uneasy with the idea of role-play, assuming it to be a free-form invitation to anarchy. However, in these activities, the teacher's role can be likened to that of a director of ceremonies. The only movement around the room is under your direction. There is no simulated fighting or arguing. If you have previously established an effective relationship with the class this activity should not lead to a breakdown of discipline. However, never make assumptions – just because an activity works with one group doesn't mean it will work with another.

Experience also suggests that the apparently risky movement can actually be of benefit with "the fidgeters", students who quickly become bored, lack confidence, feel trapped behind desks and so seek refuge in talking and other more disruptive ways. These activities licence controlled movement and talking and this meets the need of some pupils to escape from their desk-bound prison in a constructive way.

PGCE students have used these activities successfully but should first think carefully about the following:

- What teaching styles are the class used to?
- Do you know enough names to stay in control?
- What is their previous lesson and how will it affect their behaviour?
- What is the room like and the time of day?
- And even – what will the weather be like? (Beware windy days!)

Are these methods suitable for A level and university classes?

A good teaching method is a good teaching method, no matter what the age of the students.

My own PGCE students heard me say that a lot, probably too often, but that principle informs these activities, which are as effective at A level and university level as they are in primary and secondary schools. Just because students have volunteered for further study doesn't mean that they don't need to be motivated, enthused and to take part in activities that match their preferred learning styles. There are plenty of kinaesthetic learners in A level and university classes who will not learn as effectively through note-taking and lectures as they will through active learning. Everyone benefits from better group dynamics and constructive talk. Another major benefit of active learning with older students is that it helps them to read more confidently because it has introduced them to names, events and issues and so they can make sense of what otherwise was completely new material.

The major danger with older students is that they feel these activities are beneath them. It is vital, therefore, to explain the objectives and reasons for using this style of learning, even talking about the variety of learning styles. Demonstrating the maturity of your approach to teaching will help them take the risk of joining in the activity. Once they have undertaken an activity they will realise that the demands on thinking and concentration are far greater than during a one-hour lecture. These activities are not easy options!

Of course, with older students, you need to vary the quantity of information that students handle, according to their abilities, and you can expect more sophisticated responses as students gain experience of these methods, but the principles behind the activities remain the same, no matter what the age or ability of the students.

Can these activities lead to better written work?

The development of constructive talk in these activities supports the arguments advanced by Ian Luff and Rachel Rudham that listening and speaking play a vital role in stimulating thinking, turning half-formed ideas into clear arguments and promoting

more effective writing. Rudham writes tellingly of pupils previously 'going through the motions of completing a piece of written work without real thought' but then, motivated by carefully structured listening and speaking activities, achieving a depth of thinking that 'greatly enhanced the standard'.

Other reasons why activities can enhance written work is that involvement and identification with roles increase students' ability to remember information and situations and leads them to care more about the issues. Having been involved in thinking 'from the inside' of a situation, students feel that the topic matters and want to do justice to it on paper. As Geoff Lyons has written 'Arousing pupils' emotions .. is deliberately intended to help them understand that the topic matters'.

What are tabards?

Tabards are mentioned in many activities and used to identify individuals, factors or other things represented by students:

- Take a piece of sugar paper and fold it in half
- Then cut a hole large enough to put your head through along the folded side
- Open it out and it resembles a short poncho!
- Now write the name, factor or whatever on it

Tabards can represent people, periods or causal factors - or whatever you like!

Are props such as hairdryers and cuddly toys too silly to be useful?

No – provided you explain what they're for and double check understanding of the word anachronism e.g. why a mobile phone was an anachronism during an activity on the Armada. Remember that students go from one class to another to another and are yearning for something to lift a class out of the ordinary. They will notice and respond to the unusual and even the plain daft and want to know why you're using a hairdryer to teach the Norman Conquest! And they'll remember, not just the hairdryer but why you used it. And all this applies at university level as much as in primary schools.

I'd like to try this kind of activity but there isn't an activity on the site that fits my syllabus or scheme of work?

There may not be an activity on the site that matches the topic you are seeking or the age-range you teach. However that does not mean the site can't help you! There are many different models of activity here that can be adapted to other topics and to other age-ranges. For suggestions see the Notes, Variations and Feedback section under each activity or use the Site Search facility to track down references to topics.

What does the teacher get out of all the hard work preparing these activities?

Excitement, a sense of real achievement as a teacher, more students opting for your courses, the delight of getting a great response from students, parents at parents' evenings and even degree ceremonies saying 'I wish I'd been taught history like this', jealous colleagues, the satisfaction of taking a risk that comes off, better results. To rephrase Terry Pratchett, it's the most fun you can have in front of 28 (or even 280) other people.